DISAPPOINTMENT

Deuteroomy 3:23-29
34:1-8
Hebrews 11:1-3, 13

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I recently read a book entitled Hearts, the account of the phenominal breakthrough in cardiovascular surgery performed in Houston by Drs. Denton Cooley and Michael DeBakey at their respectful - and competing - institutions. It is a thrilling story of two very remarkable men. It is also the story of intense and relentless disappointment. Several years ago, in the middle of the transplant experiments, litterally hundreds and hundreds of people came to Houston from all over the world, seeking a heart transplant and a new chance at life. Their optimism was shared by the two great surgeons, expecially Cooley - who did as many transplants as he could - and quickly became the leader in the field. But today - not one of Cooley's patients is alive: all over the world their were 24 surviving transplant patients out of a total of 170 operations as of March 1, 1971. That's a lot of disappointment - for the families - for the surgeons and their teams - for the world. And beyond that there were many people who never made it to the operating tables: people for whom there were no available hearts: people who waited for weeks in Houston motels, and either died waiting, or went home, having given up in disallussioned disappointment.

While I was reading that book Senator Thomas Eagleton was undergoing his own recent disappointment at being publically coerced into resigning as the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate. And the combination of the two - the book and Senator Eagleton's heartbreak - set me to thinking about how life can almost be measured in terms of disappointment.

It set me to thinking about all the artists, muscians, designers, inventors, writers, who had a vision, an ideal; yet who were scorned while they lived and never saw a dream come true, or a picture purchased, or a symphony applauded.

It set me to thinking about Benedict Arnold, brilliant and courageous patroit - at the battles of Champlaign and Saratoga, whose bitter disappoint-

ment at public criticism and his lack of advancement led him to commit treaso

It set me to thinking about Abraham Lincoln who never lived to see his nation truly one again: about John F. Kennedy who,it was said, wanted to serve his country as a very young ex-president back in the Senate: about Martin Luther King who had a dream and never saw it realized. And about Moses who could see his dream across a river - but who died before he set his feet on the promised land.

If you're going to think about disappointment, sooner or later you have to deal with Moses. For forty long years Moses led his people through the wilderness we now know as the Sinai penninsula. He propped up the courage of a rag-tag band of semitic slaves, and convinced them that they ought to defy the military power of Egypt and walk into the dessert. By sheer force of will he persuaded them to keep going: to endure fear and hunger and thirst. By the force of his own person he melded those slaves into a nation with enough military savvy to defeat the armies of the Cannanites. Moses is literally bigger than life - one of God's very special men. And so there is an extraordinary pathos in his plea: "Let me go over, I pray, and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country". And then is extraordinary disappointment in the death of Moses in the land of Moab, close to - but not in - that "goodly hill country".

Yet there is something else going on in that account. Apparently Moses lived sometime with the knowledge that he would not see the promise fulfilled: that he would have to turn the reigns of leadership over to Joshua at the last and critical moment. Moses know that, the writer would have us understand, and yet stayed with it. Without bitterness or complaining or resentment Moses fought the good fight, did what he knew needed to be done, in the full awareness that he would be denied the final experience of victory - the actual inhabiting of the land. That's what else is going on: Moses' courage, his acceptance of this terrible disappointment: his grace to perserve to the end.

The sequel is found in the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. There Moses' name appears with others out of Israel's History: Noah, Abraham, Issac, Jacob -- men who never saw the fulfillment of the ideals for which they lived their lives.

"They died in faith", the writer puts it, "not having received what was promised, but having seen and greeted it from afar...".

The Bible, contrary to what many people think, is not full of fairy tales about men and women who obeyed God and lived happily ever after. To the contrary, it is full of people who were disappointed and who somehow learned to live complete and faithful lives in spite of disappointment. Consequently - and again unlike what many people expect - the Bible does not solve the problem of disappointment in life. It leaves the riddle of innocent suffering quite unresolved. It is not a handy guide book on how to live without getting hurt: in fact - it offers finally a man who willingly accepted disappointment - a man who, we believe, defines human life and how it is to be lived - in the middle of all kinds of disappointment.

But first, let's look at some disappointments and how they effect us.

Some disappointment is the product of imaturity. As a boy my parents took me to New York City. They had told me that the Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world. I knew how its top was some days shrouded in clouds and how airplanes sometimes circled around it. I don't know what I expected - but I was disappointed. The same thing happened at Niagra Falls. I had seen pictures and again my expectations were out of proportion. I thought the water would cascade over that edge into a bottomless pit. And when I saw it first at the age of twelve, I was pretty unimpressed. But later, having learned and lived a little more - having gained some perspective I am impressed indeed. Some disappointment is the result of immaturity. And some is the product of inflated expectations and some continues right into adulthood.

In my vocation there is no disappointment quite like going to seminary

for four years, learning how to quote Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, emerging into ordination commited to turning the institutional church into a vibrant center of theological excellence, warm Christian Charity, and passionate concern for the hungry and oppressed - and then discovering that the first item on the agenda in that first little church is how to pay the fuel bill, and that the only momentous decision the Session made during that whole first year was to paint the downspouts. That's disappointment as a product of inflated expectations. Yet tragically a lot of men throw in the towel at precisely that point.

Our culture, generally, seems to insist on an exaggerated and inflated expectation level in all things. People become disappointed with politicians, frankly, because politicians promise too much. Instead of saying "we're going to try to make things a little better next year than they are this year" candidates for high office would have us believe that their election will result in miraculous and immediate improvement. And it just doesn't happen.

Television advertising promises so much that it fairly boggles the mind. Tooth paste never made anybody sexier: after shave lotion never really made anyone irresistable: diet pepsi won't produce the results that make their commercials so interesting. furniture polish, floor cleaners, detergents, deoderants, gasoline, tires,clothes - are all marketed on the basis of expectations that everyone knows are ridiculous. And I long for someone to have the candor to say simply: "We think our product is good." But the dream is there: the dream that just maybe I won't be disappointed this time.

And the dream is part of what has come to be known as the sensate culture. We want instant gratification. Someone is even marketing an electronic organ that promises to make you an instant muscian by manipulating a series of buttons and then pushing color coded keys: an ultimate insult to anyone who has spent countless hours of hard work refining musical ability.

The trouble is, that kind of culture inevitably breads a kind of permanent disappointment in important things like marriage. And there - in that

context it becomes brutal and demeaning and destructive. "Is That All There Is?" Someone sang it a couple of years ago. And it is an inevitable question in a culture that promises instead gratification of inflated expectations.

Some disappointment is the result of caring: of loving: of having an ideal - a dream -- and working for it. It is a difficult task to commit oneself to an ideal great or small, and work for thatideal sometimes alone, and always miles away from its accomplishment. The complex array of social problems confronting our society drives the timid for cover. To care enough about our community, for instance, to be involved personally in the hard work of helping to improve it is to spend hour after hour in meetings, to sacrifice time and energy, and many times to be disappointed - to see one's efforts rejected, or misunderstood, or scorned. But to care deeply is to plunge in again -- never to give up regardless of the number of times we have been disappointed.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem -- "If" part of which goes this way:

"If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them 'Hold On'
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it
And -- which is more - you'll be a Man, my Son."

Of course, it's possible to avoid the pain of this kind of disappointment by not caring.

The Greek stoics taught that a man should not love his wife or child too much and then he would not be devastated by their death. One way to avoid being disappointed politically is never to run for an office, or never commit oneself to the fortunes of a particular party or candidate. One way to avoid the hurt of having one's dearest dream rejected is never to dream the dream: never to expend any of oneself in its prosecution. Yet what the

country needs: what our community needs: and what Christian Faith demands is a depth and strength of caring that can hold on through all kinds of disappointment, and stand to fight another day.

Some disappointment just happens as a result of the freedom God has given us. There is no one here who has not been disappointed in this way. An illness, a physically disability, the loss of a vocational possibility; and most poignantly the premature death of someone very dear to us. To attribute it to the Will of God is not the answer. The Bible does not teach that God visits tragedy on his children. Rather tragedy, sickness, death, are the results of freedom: they happen because God grants us to live in the kind of free universe in which accidents can happen.

What the Bible offers is not a simple answer but a presence, a power to stand with us in disappointment, a love that enables us to try again, to live another day.

The Bible points to a Moses, giving his life for the liberation of his people, and then dying on the banks of the Jordan. The Bible offers the Son of a Carpenter, holding up a vision before his people, living for it, and then finally, in the Garden of Gethsemane, experiencing acute disappointment as a conspiracy to be rid of him was about to succeed. What the Bible offers is one who wanted to be a savior, hanging from a cross - and yet even there, trusting in the goodness and mercy and love of God.

The Bible offers a man by the name of Paul who was disappointed time and time again: a man who had been beaten, jailed, exiled and shipwrecked in the process of living his dream: Paul who could nevertheless write to the Christian Church in Rome: "Who shall separate us from the love of God? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerers through him who loved us." (Rom 8:35, 37)

That, I think, is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he said," They died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen and

greeted it from afar." And that, I think, is the very best news in the face of the kinds of disappointment you and I experience. We have seen the promised land. We know that we are safe in God's love. We know that one day all things will conform to his will. We know what kind of lives he expects us to live. And in that knowledge there is no disappointment that cannot be borne: no disappointment that cannot be transcended and overcome.

AMEN

Father, keep us caring enough to risk disappointment. And when it comes help us to stand firm to fight another day. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN